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THE

IRREGULARITIES

OF

ENGLISH SPELLING:

What they Cost and What
they are Worth.

(*Reprinted, with additions, from the SPELLING REFORMER for April,*
1881.)

“English Spelling is a national misfortune.”—MAX MÜLLER.

“The English system of Spelling (I protest against its being called *orthography*) is a labyrinth, a chaos, an absurdity—a disgrace to our age and nation.”—Sir C. E. TREVELYAN, K.C.B.

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The Irregularities of English Spelling : What they

Cost and What they are Worth.

GOOD words, it has been said, cost little and are worth much. Good spelling, so-called, or exact adherence to the present fashion of clothing words in letters has been abundantly proved to cost a great deal and to be worth very little.

It is a source of comfort to be assured that a thing well and clearly proved is on the high road to belief. Truth has, however, no power of self-propagation. Its power can only be felt when it is backed by truthful and earnest men. Thanks to the labour and the frank utterances of thoughtful students of the science of language, the leading etymologists are now, almost without exception, agreed that the only spelling worthy to be called good is that which clearly reveals the spoken word.

To spell correctly in the fashion of the present day is looked upon as one of the essential points of education. In the path towards a worthy education, such as that conceived by the master spirits of old and of our own time, a painful striving after rigid uniformity in a matter of small moment is a real stumbling-block and stone of offence.

What a liberal education should be has been set forth by no living writer more forcibly than by Professor Huxley. For proof of this it is enough to refer to his address on "A Liberal Education, and Where to Find It." ("Lay Sermons, Addresses and Reviews.")

Should we not, Professor Huxley asks, "if the life and fortune of every one of us would one day or other depend upon winning or losing a game of chess, . . . look with a disapprobation amounting to scorn, upon the father who allowed his son, or the State which allowed its members, to grow up without knowing a pawn from a knight?"

"It is a plain and elementary truth," he goes on to say, "that the life, the fortune, and the happiness of every one of us, and, more or less, of those who are connected with us, do depend upon our knowing something of the rules of a game infinitely more difficult and complicated than chess. It is a game which has been played for untold ages, every man and woman of us being one of the two players in a game of his or her own. The chess board is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature What I mean by

education, is learning the rules of this mighty game. In other words, education is the instruction of the intellect in the laws of Nature, under which name I include not merely things and their forces, but men and their ways : and the fashioning of the affections, and of the will into an earnest and loving desire to move in harmony with those laws. For me, education means neither more nor less than this."

In such education as the above, as well as in the most ordinary education, the knowledge of reading and writing must play a leading part. The difficulties at present in the way of acquiring this knowledge irresistibly suggest the further questions—

What would be thought if to the difficulties inseparable from the game of chess were added others, such as that in certain circumstances the moves and values of the pieces must sometimes (and only *sometimes*) be interchanged, and that now and then pieces must be regarded as lost, although still allowed to encumber the board? What if in musical notation, sharps were sometimes to be read as flats, and flats as sharps, the judgment of the player or his recollection of the tune, alone serving as guide? Or what if, in naval signals, the same flags meant now a cask of water and now a barrel of pork, the sender having to guess which was most likely to be wanted?

The above are unvarnished samples of the difficulties which a child encounters in learning to read and spell. The same letters or combinations of letters stand for many different sounds, and the same sound is expressed by many different letters or combinations of letters. No well informed person doubts that the letters in words were originally meant to stand each for its own sound. How far they do so in English spelt in its present motley garb may be seen from the following illustrations, and pages might be filled with similar instances.

1. The same letter or combination of letters standing for different sounds.

Fat, fated, far, fall, want, many.

Post, lost, dost : rose, lose : posed, dosed :

Rove, love, move : cover, over, mover, hover.

Bone, done, gone, one.

Changed, hanged : anger, hanger, danger. Singer, finger, ginger. Suggest, snuggest.

Tallowed, swallowed, allowed. Plague, league, ague.

Pleas, ideas ; pleased, leased ; least, breast.

Great, heat, sweat, treated, created.

Hear, heart, heard, beard. Slumber, plumber.

Tomb, comb, bomb.

Good, food, blood. Shoes, hoes, does.

Round, soup, mould, touch.

Severe, severed, fevered, revered, reverent.

2. The same sound represented by a different letter or combination of letters.

Pain, day, gaol, ale, great, vein, they, reign, eight, straight.

Leaf, beef, chief, seize, pique, people, key, quay.

My, nigh, rite, tie, sign, guile, rhyme, guy, rye, eye.

Do, two, too, shoe, brew, true, soup, through.

No, foe, low, boat, soul, sew, folk, beau, though.

Head, ell, leopard, heifer, friend, any, said, guess, bury.

Foot, full, woman, would. Pour, boar, store, door.

Sell, cell, pulse, farce, scent, schism, pass, psalm.

With a lively, painstaking, and intelligent teacher, all the difficulties in the way of learning to *read* can be rapidly surmounted by the "Look and Say" method. The assumed necessity of teaching children, at an early age, to *spell*, has, however, hitherto stood in the way of the general adoption of this time-saving method.

Hence children in many elementary schools sing the spelling of words aloud, three or four, or even six times over. Hours upon hours are spent in the lower standards in singing their spelling lessons.

Such teaching, in the country of Milton and Locke, and in the age of Huxley and Herbert Spencer, is a large part of what is known as popular *education*! True education, let us remember, is "the instruction of the intellect in the laws of Nature...things and their forces...men and their ways."

Meanwhile, arithmetic, the poor man's logic, which properly taught affords at once useful knowledge and valuable mental training, figures in the dread "results" with far less per-centage than its sister R's. Lessons in the laws of life and health, thrift and social well-being, drawing, singing by note—in short, on "things and their forces...men and their ways," are almost vainly struggling for admission into schools where the ogre "Correct Spelling" grins in possession of nearly one-third of the whole available time, and where such songs are heard as :—

ar, eye, ess, ee, rise

see, ar, eye, ee, ess, cries

tee, aitch, eye, jee, aitch, ess, thighs

ee, wye, ee, ess, eyes

pea, ar, eye, zed, ee, prize.

It is not meant that differently spelt words of similar sound are thus said or sung in immediate succession. Teacher and child would alike revolt at this, but each variety comes in its due turn. Neither is it meant that school inspectors, Mr. Matthew Arnold and others, are wont to stand by with uncovered heads, in sympathetic resignation, while these hymns to Mumbo Jumbo are intoned. These performances are not for them, nor for visitors. They are solely

used to imprint upon the child's memory the letters which, when the annual examination comes, he will have to make in black and white for the satisfaction of the said inspector. If the child, Tom Smith, or Mary Jones, spells so as to please the inspector, he or she earns a few shillings for the school funds, whereof perhaps one goes into the pocket of the teacher, and may be held to represent the butter on his own children's bread. If not, the child is marked down for renewed grinding up before the next examination time comes round.

And what, broadly, are the results obtained? First of all, what should be the ideal standard? On this point let us note the words of the Duke of Richmond and Gordon and Lord George Hamilton, written in their official capacity as heads of the Education Department. "By the age of 13, if properly taught, these children [*i.e.*, intelligent children in regular attendance] can pass through the six standards of the Code, and the three stages of one or more of the subjects of the fourth schedule."* As a matter of fact the total number of children who pass the sixth standard is only *one and a small fraction* for each certificated teacher engaged. In many a school the sixth standard is altogether unrepresented.

Some ten years ago, Mr. Matthew Arnold, in his official report, said: "It is found possible, by ingenious preparation, to get children through the revised code examination in reading, writing, and ciphering, without their really knowing how to read, write, and cipher." (Education Report, 1869—70, p. 291). It is to be hoped that this, at least, is no longer possible, for if those children who *do* pass don't *know*, how great must be the darkness! And yet under any circumstances it must be felt to be still true, as was once well observed in the *Times*, that in schools for the poor, "The average school boy is pushed just far enough up the hill of the six standards to roll back with great facility the moment the pressure of school is removed."

It has been proved† that if English spelling could be made as regular as that of the Italian or the Spanish language, fully one-half of the time spent in learning to read and write English would be available for other purposes. The Germans, whose spelling is far less in need of reform than the English, are busily engaged in its further improvement. The English child is heavily handicapped in the race of life as far as spelling is concerned, as compared with the German child. German boys are often taught two or three languages while our children are struggling in the time honoured and religiously perpetuated tangles of one. That one, however, its antiquated spelling apart, is fitted by its grand literature, its simple grammar and wide vocabulary, to become a world-language, and is believed by many destined to become the universal tongue. However that may be, it is already spoken by more millions than is any other language upon

* Report of the Committee of Council for Education, 1879—80, page x.

† Spelling Reform from an Educational Point of View, by Dr. J. H. Gladstone, F.R.S. Macmillan & Co.

the globe, and the peoples who speak it are those whose numbers are most rapidly increasing.

And now arises the question, wherein does the value of these time-wasting, brain-confusing irregularities consist? Either they are of use in perpetuating the history of words and affording clues to their true meaning, or they are valueless. It is sufficient to repeat that those who are known to be the first philologists and etymologists of the age are the most eager for the introduction of phonetic spelling. Can higher authorities than those of Max Müller, Whitney, Sayce, March, Latham, Murray, Ellis and Sweet be cited? These are some of the men at the head of the present movement for reform.

The sympathies of those to whom spelling difficulties may not have cost much are earnestly besought for others, at least five times as many (and shall we say less deserving?), to whom spelling difficulties have been shown to mean a great deal.

It is sometimes urged that the eccentricities and anomalies of spelling should be retained, because they afford exercise for a child's powers of application, observation, and memory. The same purpose would be served if the schoolhouse itself were removed further off from each child and made more difficult to find.

What is desired is merely a change of fashion. This is admittedly no slight thing, but individual effort and example can accomplish it. In this country, government initiative would be powerless to bring it about. The movement must begin with enlightened scholars whose hearts are stirred on behalf of less favoured millions of their countrymen. Its beginnings must be countenanced by the universities, and adopted in schools for the higher classes, or they will certainly be repudiated in schools for the people. No low-caste spelling will obtain in England.

School inspectors, principals of training colleges, school masters and mistresses, will all alike fail in their duty if they do not make widely known the fact that the present fashion of spelling is a fashion merely, and that a common agreement would inevitably introduce a less harmful fashion. Every teacher having first done his best to make children spell so as to win the inspector's approval and earn the all-important government grant, should on their leaving school, say to them in an earnest and friendly manner: "My child, this English spelling which has cost us so much is really worth very little after all. Some competent people, in fact, call it 'a national misfortune,'[‡] 'a labyrinth, a chaos, an absurdity, a disgrace to our age and nation.'"[§]

When the millions know that such is the verdict of those best qualified to judge, the work of the English Spelling Reform Association will be as easy as it is now difficult and uphill. Until the desire for change is strongly felt, each and every scheme cannot fail to be unpalatable.

J. B. RUNDELL.

‡ Max Müller.

§ Sir C. E. Trevelyan.

OBJECTIONS TO PHONETIC SPELLING ANSWERED.

1. That phonetic spelling would change the language.

Changing the spelling alters the language no more than changing a man's dress alters the man. A flexible and well-fitting garment is better than one that is ill-fitting and rigid. The root-meaning of the word 'language' is *tongue-action*.

2. That it would destroy the history of words.

This is the view maintained by Archbishop Trench in his "Study of Words" and "English Past and Present." It is not shared by the leading etymologists of the present day, for the following reasons: (a) persons competent to benefit by the traces of a word's history afforded by its spelling, would still perceive those traces in the phonetic spelling, (b) the sound of words is at least as important a part of their history as their spelling, (c) the present spelling is very often etymologically misleading, (d) the phonetic spelling of many words would be more etymologically correct than their present spelling: e.g., *tung, iland, foren, sovren, rime*. The etymology of words, moreover, is often no guide to their present meaning: e.g., *knave, villain, pagan*.

3. That it would render existing books and libraries useless.

The difficulty we find in reading old books arises from the use of obsolete words and allusions, and only to a very small degree from difference of spelling: e.g., "*pittyfull weak hammes, gowty legges*," in the first edition of Hamlet; "*suttle thief*," in Milton's spelling. On the other hand, it has been proved that children learn to read books printed in the present (or in older) spelling in less time and with far less trouble when they have first been taught to read in books printed phonetically. This can be done in a few hours. The increase in the number of readers would render existing libraries of more use than at present.

4. That its introduction would create confusion on account of the present differences of pronunciation.

Within certain limits there is a "received" English pronunciation, which is neither "cockney" nor provincial. Most people would adopt this pronunciation if they could. The spelling in books and newspapers might serve as a guide to it. Persons who have provincial or other peculiarities of pronunciation could not record these peculiarities on paper without special teaching. In nearly all cases they would prefer to be taught to write words in the way in which educated people speak them. Dialects could, however, be written if preferred.

5. That it has a strange appearance.

It is open to every person who chooses, to take from the force of this objection by joining in promoting the adoption of a better and truer way of spelling. See advertisement on next page.

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The objects of the Association are:—

- I. To collect, arrange, and distribute information on the subject of Spelling Reform.
- II. To collect works on Spelling Reform, and to preserve copies of articles bearing on the subject from periodicals.
- III. To institute and watch experiments on teaching to read, spell, and pronounce, with reformed systems.
- IV. To promote lectures and public meetings for the purpose of imparting information on Spelling Reform, and for memorializing Public Bodies in its favour.

In view of the great number of considerations which will have to be weighed before adopting any one mode of re-constituting English Spelling, the SPELLING REFORM ASSOCIATION abstains for the present from recommending any particular scheme.

The ASSOCIATION therefore invites all persons interested in improvements of English Spelling of *any kind whatsoever*, whether merely for elementary school instruction or for national adoption, however much they may differ in opinion as to the mode, character, or extent of such improvements, to become members of the Association, and assist it both by money and advice.

To admit of the formation of a very large Association, which will effectively represent public opinion, the minimum annual subscription is fixed at *five shillings*.

Cheques and Post Office Orders (on the Chief Money Order Office) should be made payable to the Secretary, and both Orders and Cheques should be crossed R. Twining and Co.

